Anatomy of a Pitch-Perfect Press Release
How to craft a release that gets results

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Public relations can be a cost-effective way to supplement a marketing program or to put a small company "on the map." However, no matter how interesting your company news might be, if you don't create a press release that sells your story, it won't get picked up by the media–whether it is an industry blogger or a network news producer. It is also becoming increasingly popular to send press releases to customers and prospects in an effort to generate buzz and provide more information about your product or service.

THE BASICS
New media and traditional reporters are always on deadline; therefore, presenting your news in an accessible and familiar format is key to helping them craft an accurate story and to maintaining a good relationship with a reporter. Adhering to the journalistic structure and the basics is akin to speaking a reporter's language and making a long lasting, trusting relationship. A press release requires a format beginning with "For Immediate Release" in the top left corner. The right side of the release traditionally states the company contact information. If you need help with press release formatting, Microsoft and GoogleDocs both have simple templates to follow.

The title of the release is crucial. It must be catchy, clever, and must convey the gist of the story in fewer than a dozen words. Whether it is an event, a new product launch, or a personnel announcement, it should be clear from the title, and augmented by a subtitle.

The five Ws–who, what, when, where, and why–should be addressed in the first paragraph, or journalists are likely to delete your release. "No one wants to hunt for the most rudimentary information," says veteran business journalist Anne Fields. "If I don't immediately get my foremost questions answered, my time is wasted." Write in interesting, colorful language, but nothing too "cutesy" or funny.

The next two paragraphs add depth and texture to the announcement. A quote from the spokesperson should follow, giving his/her perspective on the announcement and what it means to the company and its target audience. The last paragraph neatly wraps things up, and includes, in PR parlance a "boilerplate"– an old newspaper term meaning a standard block of text that is used over and over again (e.g., a company description or the explanation of symbols).

WEB-READY RELEASES
A basic, well-written press release with compelling subject matter is still the gold standard, but to make an impact online, you must be able to spread virtually, and become ubiquitous. Implementing search engine optimization (SEO) principles can help parlay your press release into a search result. Before you begin writing your press release, use a keyword search tool, such as the one found at www.adwords.google.com, to hone in on the keywords your audience is searching for. Use these suggested words when writing your press release, especially in the headline.

Also make sure to include hyperlinks for keywords, company names, or phrases, so that consumers and journalists can use your press release as a jump-off point to search for additional information. Embed photos, videos, and company logos in your press release. A truly relevant visual (not a mundane, static CEO headshot) helps journalists formulate an angle.

Using paid online distribution sites such as PR Newswire or PR Web also can help bring better search engine placement and incoming page views to a website, because these sites are "crawled" by search engines more often and faster than an independent or small website. There are also some free online distribution sites available. To get started, visit www.alyabdullah.com/top-30-freeonline-press-release-distributionsites for a listing of 30 free online press release distribution sites.

10 GOLDEN RULES FROM THE EXPERTS

1. KNOW YOUR AUDIENCE. If the contact is a fashion and beauty writer, do not send a press release on a flu outbreak in Mexico. Similarly, get to know your audience; according to Alyson McNutt English, a freelancer and blogger, "Form a relationship. Don't just lob off-target, faceless pitches hoping to score a hit. If you are a professional I can trust, I'll refer friends to you."

2. PERSONALIZE YOUR RELEASE, says Jene Lupoli-Luciani, the beauty editor for the Westchester Wag. "Rather than, 'Hi, I would like to tell you about a new wrinkle cream,' reference the publication I write for or the new blog I started to let me know that you know what I do."

3. SAY SOMETHING. Writer David McKay Wilson echoed other pros by asking for press releases with a "real hook, and quotes I can use." Those queried add, "Don't use throwaway quotes with generic wording; use real quotes that add context and flavor to the story."

4. STAY AWAY FROM SUPERLATIVES. "Telling us something is the best on the planet makes us suspicious, rather than interested. In other words, use more facts than flash," says Geoff Williams, a freelance journalist specializing in personal finance.

5. HAVE THE IMPORTANT INFORMATION UP FRONT. Media do not want to wade through fluff for the news. Make it easy to find.

6. START WITH A GOOD EMAIL SUBJECT LINE AND HEADLINE, says health writer, Nancy Gottesman. "If it's a subject I'm interested in writing about, I open it." If your subject line doesn't resound with the recipient, it will go unopened.

7. UNDERSTAND DEADLINES. If the writer is at a newspaper, a couple of weeks prior to an event is ok, but, adds McNutt English, "Magazine writers need a good four-month lead time minimum, and usually at least two months for online publications."

8. AVOID ATTACHMENTS. Do not attach the release to an email; attachments are the "kiss of death" for many journalists. Cut and paste the information into the body of the email.

9. BE BRIEF. Keep the release to one page. No superfluous jargon, no run-on sentences or paragraphs, no overused buzzwords. For example, the "greening" of anything is already getting tired, or even the word buzzword.

10. QUALITY COUNTS. Spell-check, double check dates, names, and titles, and be sure you've accepted changes from Microsoft Word's track changes function before you send. Some PR pros now send releases out in PDF form to avoid sending a marked-up Word doc. PDFs also prevent outside parties from changing a release and forwarding it with misinformation.

NEW IS NEWS (AND SOME THINGS REALLY AREN'T NEWS)
The basis of an effective press release is the information it contains. Does your content warrant a press release? Before you begin writing, step away from your computer and ask yourself, "Is this news?"

Examples of what can be considered news include new awards received, and new product introductions or extensions. Responsible companies also should release news of product recalls, legal proceedings for or against companies, or news about company principals.

If your information is not news, do not send a press release. Instead, write a personal note pitching the story to a contact, but do not mislead reporters with something less than newsworthy. Don't risk becoming considered spam; a reporter might ignore the next truly newsworthy email from you or your company.

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